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"THAT'S JUST THE WAY WE LIKE IT": THE CHILDREN'S HORROR FILM IN THE 1980'S

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

"THAT'S JUST THE WAY WE LIKE IT": THE CHILDREN'S HORROR FILM IN THE 1980'S

The decade of the 1980's has often been considered a reactionary artistic wasteland in film studies, but it was nonetheless a period of volatile changes for the film industry. This period saw the decline of the mainstream horror film and the rise of the family film, two currents that reflect and illuminate the enormous changes in film production, marketing, and distribution. The hybrid genre of the children's horror film, born in the 1980's, is particularly apt for discussing both the industry changes in this period and children's relationship as viewers to the medium of film. The thesis defines the children's horror film as a subgenre and focuses primarily on five films: *The Watcher in the Woods*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *Gremlins*, *The Lost Boys*, and *Lady in White*. The following thesis is an electronic document presented in PDF format.

KEYWORDS: Film Production, Children, Horror films, 1980's

Multimedia Elements Used: mpg

Christina Mitchell Bentley

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THESIS

Christina Mitchell Bentley

The Graduate School

University of Kentucky

2002

**"THAT'S JUST THE WAY WE LIKE IT":
THE CHILDREN'S HORROR FILM IN THE 1980'S**

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences at the
University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Gregory A. Waller, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2002

*For my mother, who taught me, in the beginning,
that scary movies are good for you.*

*And for my students, who taught me
that to be a teacher is to always be a student.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The children's film is an old genre and one fairly easy to recognize in its purest form. Children's films are those made for, marketed toward, and addressed to children. On the other hand, we could debate for years (and indeed many have) the precise parameters of the horror film. For purposes of broad categorization, however, it seems safe to say that horror films concern themselves with the nature of the monstrous—what it is, where it comes from, and whether or not it can be defeated. Certainly, one can make the argument that a host of other kinds of movies also deal with these same issues. For my purposes, the family adventure film, as Peter Krämer has defined it, overlaps in so many ways with the "children's horror film" that it could almost be considered indistinguishable. *ET* (1982)¹ certainly *feels* like a horror film for at least the first half hour and it certainly concerns itself with the question of what is monstrous—the anthropomorphic alien or the de-humanized men in space suits. *Gremlins* (1984) is not only one of Krämer's family adventure movies but also borders on science fiction. (After all, the gremlins' physiological oddities of reproduction and metamorphosis are no less explicable than those of *Star Trek*'s tribbles.) Genre is a fluid and complex concept. Suffice it to say that I concede this point.

It seems safe to say, however, that all the films I have taken into detailed consideration are films that would have been described by the children who went to see them—between 1980 and 1989—as "scary movies." They are movies in which things that really do happen to children—things like bullying, emotional abandonment, sexual fears, and the often frightening quest for an adult identity—are coded as things that really don't happen to them—things like attacks by swarms of ghouls and tarantulas, the

discovery that one's older brother is a vampire, and possession by a being from another dimension. They explore what children explore: relationships with peers and parents, independence, social groups and gender roles. Like fairy tales, they code ordinary childhood fears as fantastic otherworldly adversaries. In horror films, the powerful bullying "Soc's" of Coppola's *The Outsiders* (1983) or Ace Merrill's gang in *Stand By Me* (1986) become the vampire gang of *The Lost Boys* (1987), ultimately no more than teenage bullies but imbued with the supernatural power (as well as the supernatural weaknesses) that reflect children's real experience of powerlessness and offer a satisfying dose of wish-fulfillment.

It is not surprising, then, that the children's horror film deals repeatedly with a small number of topics, relationships with parents and other authority figures chief among them. The films with young male protagonists show a heavy tendency toward Oedipal themes: both monsters and heroes tend to be associated with the father. It is also not surprising that these films often focus on a quest for identity and control over one's own life and destiny, two highly abstract concepts that children actively struggle with but are often unable to deal with directly. The potential for evil often dwells in the very body of goodness, and it is not always easy to find the "monster." The young protagonist's strength is his unique ability to do so. These children recognize the problem and then take control of it. They frequently save their parents and, in doing so, often recreate them.

I've used several criteria to determine the films under consideration, although choosing what films to focus on wasn't easy, and such criteria are never perfectly scientific. The 1970's and 1980s saw a number of industry changes that altered the way Hollywood made, marketed, and distributed films and that forever changed the way viewers would gain access to movies

¹ All production data, including dates, production companies, and cast and crew credits were obtained from Internet Movie Database <<http://www.imdb.com>> and are consistent with that service as of 21 April 2002.

and the conditions in which movies would be viewed. By the mid-1980s, movies clearly designed for teenage consumption routinely received R ratings. The craze in sell-through video and the incredible success of *ET* created a scramble for the children's audience, and George Lucas' success with *Star Wars* (1977) showcased children not only as viewers but as powerful *consumers* as well. These upheavals in the industry, especially those that affected ratings, sometimes make it difficult to determine films that are targeted directly toward children. While it's easy to see children as the target audience for such early-80's Disney fare as *The Watcher in the Woods* (1980), the criteria get more complicated for films like *The Lost Boys* (rated R but promoted through its stars in young teen magazines like *Tiger Beat*) and *Gremlins* (whose young adult protagonist mixes with townsfolk who wax nostalgic about World War II but tangles with monsters who were sold as stuffed dolls and read along records). Frank LaLoggia's *Lady in White* (1988) originally received an R rating, but LaLoggia made no additional cuts to finally get a PG-13; he simply protested to the MPAA and resubmitted the film.² I have depended less on ratings exclusively and more on other industry markers, things like ancillary marketing and casting, to determine those films that seem to have been intended to have kid appeal.

This is not to say, of course, that I would ever attempt to prove that children are the only audience for these films. As Peter Krämer has pointed out, the modern children's film is in fact a family film, intended to be viewed by multiple audiences *together*. The modern cineplex of the 1980s and beyond is not the 1960's picture show where children go alone with a pack of friends and their weekly allowance. By 1980, television had firmly usurped the Saturday morning kid crowd. Furthermore, the 1980s saw the astronomical rise of the VCR, and by the beginning of the 1990's more

² All comments by Frank LaLoggia are from the director's commentary on the Director's Cut Special Edition DVD.

people were watching movies at home than in theatres (Allen 112). While I am most interested in those elements of these films that deal with children's concerns, I will also attempt to show how such movies address multiple audiences.

For the purposes of differentiation, I will also discuss certain trends in the mainstream horror film of the same time period. The children's horror film is a hybrid genre, and that being the case, it seems as important to talk about the one foot it has in the horror genre as to talk about the one in the family genre. Partly due to the influence of Stephen King and the box office success of precursors like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976), children became increasingly important in mainstream horror films in the 1980s. In fact, it may be safe to say that the decade's most profitable horror films (and those that have achieved pop icon status) are indeed horror movies that feature children in leading roles—films like *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Shining* (1980) and *Child's Play* (1988). I contend, however, that there is a distinct difference between featuring a child in a leading role and presenting a child *protagonist*. The purpose of children in most mainstream horror films is to act either as particularly unsettling victims or as marvelously eerie monsters. While "good guy" children may sometimes step in to alter the story or even to momentarily save the day, most mainstream horror films do not offer them the central protagonist role.

The other huge trend still working its way through the mainstream horror genre in the 1980s was the stalk-and-slash movie. The prototypes for these films were, of course, Tobe Hooper's 1974 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and John Carpenter's 1978 *Halloween*, both of which proved to be breathtaking *business* investments, each grossing upwards of \$30 million on virtually nonexistent production budgets (*Internet Movie Database*). *Friday the 13th*, with a \$700,000 budget, was released in 1980 to the tune of a more than \$37 million gross (*Internet Movie Database*). The "slasher" movie was perhaps the

single defining trend of horror in the decade. *Friday the 13th* spawned seven sequels before 1990. *Halloween* spawned four. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) also spawned four sequels, as well as a short-lived television series. These films invariably featured teenage protagonists (and victims), but they also constitute a subgenre of their own, related to, but ultimately distinct from, the children's horror film. In addition, research on the slasher film abounds, and Carol Clover alone has proven that the intricacies of the slasher film merit an entire book³. It is mostly for these reasons that I have decided to focus on a slightly younger audience. I have defined "children" as under 16—as opposed to under 18—in order to deliberately avoid these films.

There seems little question but that the very popular "teenie kill pic" of the 1980s was designed to appeal to an audience many of whom, legally, could not view these films in the theatre. The strict genre "teenie kill pic," however, seems *particularly designed* to appeal to an audience between 16 and 20; it spares little thought for a multiplicity of audiences and so has little to say to or about children under 16. The slasher genre almost always marginalizes children. As a genre particularly fond of babysitters, camp counselors, and nurses, slasher films often include children, but the children in these films are objects. They are plot devices for keeping the heroine in the house, symbols of responsibility vs. irresponsibility on the part of the film's primary victims, or props used largely for atmosphere, particularly in the case of the "festivity" films centered on Halloween or Christmas.⁴ Furthermore,

³ I cite only Clover here because it is her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* that has garnered the most critical attention, but a tremendous number of film and cultural critics have done work on the slasher film, including Gary Heba (whose work on the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films seems particularly relevant), Robin Wood, Tony Williams, Philip Brophy, and Tania Modleski to name only a few.

⁴ The exception here is *Child's Play*, an R-rated slasher film with a central child character. I admit that I have excepted *Child's Play* purely on the basis of its contents and marketing. Not only do I simply think the film is too scary and violent for children, it was a mainstream Hollywood movie with a great deal of marketing force behind it, and it was never pitched to

slasher films in general concern themselves a great deal with graphic sex, and while I would not want to argue that children do not, I am prepared to argue that filmmakers *believe* they don't. The slasher film has something to tell us about the trajectory of horror in the 1980s, and its relationship to its young audience is relevant to any discussion of kids and horror films, but the slasher movie is at the periphery of what I want to discuss here.

Let me also say at this point that I am not at all interested in the question of whether scary movies are "good for" kids. I am not a psychologist. If pressed on the issue I would be inclined to say that I subscribe to the philosophy of Bruno Bettelheim, who *is* a psychologist and whose book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, I have used throughout my own work, mostly in drawing parallels between horror films and fairy tales. Bettelheim's theory is that children are in fact much more resilient than adults believe them to be and that the violent and disturbing images in scary fairy tales serve a much-needed psychological purpose in children's development. At the risk of accusations of dodging a currently "hot" topic, I must say my opinion of kids and horror films is quite similar.

Choosing the films

It is never possible to attempt to define a subgenre without a certain degree of circularity. The criteria we use to define a genre is always colored by what we want to say about it, and I admit that my work is not beyond such criticism. I have attempted, however, to choose criteria that were at least relatively objective whenever possible. Not all of the films fit every criteria, but all of them do fit more than they miss. I am also not above admitting that the individual films I've selected are most certainly not the only children's horror films to come out during this time period. They are simply the ones I have chosen to focus on.

children. Hollywood marketing executives are simply too savvy not to tap the child market if they can, and with *Child's Play*, they didn't even try.

Initially, I intended only to focus on films from the 1980s that shared a strong element of the supernatural and a strong central child character. This list, however, included a number of films that, although they featured children in leading roles, clearly weren't targeted toward an under-18 audience. Such films included *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Pet Sematary* (1989), and *Halloween 4* (1988). Many of these adult-oriented films about children have received a great deal of detailed and respectable critical attention, among them Tony Williams' excellent *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*. Furthermore, these films lacked any attempt on the industry's part to market them toward a child audience.

I ended up choosing five films, spanning the time period from 1981 to 1988:

<i>The Watcher in the Woods</i> (1981) directed by John Hough for Walt Disney Pictures	<i>Gremlins</i> (1984) directed by Joe Dante for Amblin Ent./Warner Brothers
<i>Something Wicked This Way Comes</i> (1983) directed by Jack Clayton for Walt Disney Pictures	<i>The Lost Boys</i> (1987) directed by Joel Schumacher for Warner Brothers
	<i>Lady in White</i> (1988) directed by Frank LaLoggia Dist. by New Century Vista Film Co.

Each of these films fits at least some of the following criteria: an ancillary marketing campaign heavily weighted toward children's products; media marketing, through either paid advertising or "entertainment news" sources, that appeals to children under sixteen; a clear association with a traditionally

“family” production company (for my purposes, this essentially translates into Walt Disney Productions)⁵; and a strong child protagonist, as opposed to a child villain or a child victim. I also considered MPAA ratings, although I did not consider an R rating sufficient to keep a film off the list. Of the films I have chosen, only one, *The Lost Boys*, is rated R (although *Lady in White* is rated PG13, and *Gremlins* was perhaps the single most instrumental film in the creation of the PG13 rating). The PG- or even PG13-rated horror film is a rare enough creature to limit the original list sufficiently, but using ratings as a hard-and-fast rule seemed to unrealistically ignore the true complications of audience address. The R-rated films that were intended for and marketed toward the under-eighteen crowd in the 1980s include not only the rash of teenage slasher pictures but, more pointedly, films like the boys’ school comedy *Heaven Help Us* (1985) and John Hughes’ *The Breakfast Club* (1985). While these films appeal to a slightly older crowd than I am writing about, these films seem at least sufficient evidence that a film’s MPAA rating during this time period was scarcely a deterrent to underage viewing. “A study conducted by the Junior League of New York in the late 1980s found the average 10-11-year-old watched four R-rated videos each month...” (Allen 115). This situation is due at least partly to the changes that were sweeping through the film industry in the 1980s, changes that these films were not only caught up in but also, in some cases, helped to effect.

The Importance of Kid Merchandising and Sell-through Video

No significant trend can be pinned down precisely to a single moment, but we would be hard pressed to talk about movie industry changes in the 1980s

⁵ You may notice that *Lady in White* lists no actual production company. Coming off what he describes as a bad experience with his last Hollywood film, Frank LaLoggia wrote, directed and scored *Lady in White* and was fiercely protective of his artistic control. Funding for the film was raised in a way to prevent producer interference, by pitching the film as a penny stock and selling to as many stockholders as possible. The actual production company for the film was New Sky Communications, Inc., but this company was essentially *Lady in White* itself. I have

without first talking about George Lucas and the phenomenal success of *Star Wars* in 1977. I have already mentioned the tremendous impact that Carpenter's *Halloween* had on the horror genre. *Star Wars* had a similar impact on the industry in general, bringing together a financially lucrative movie with an equally lucrative ancillary product campaign exemplified by (but certainly not limited to) the line of Kenner "action figures" that accompanied the film.⁶ Though *Star Wars* was certainly not the first film to utilize product tie-ins (especially children's products), its remarkable success on this front created a ready-made model for profit—toys.⁷ Lucas and Twentieth Century-Fox were also extraordinarily open about the value they put on the film's merchandising potential: "...Fox executive Mark Pepvers has commented that, 'George Lucas created *Star Wars* with the toy byproducts in mind'" (Wyatt 152). Lucas actually "sought to control all merchandising rights for the film" and "within the first year, merchandising had accounted for at least \$300 million for *Star Wars*" (152).

Although a case can be made (and I will attempt to make it later on) for the "childishness" of *Gremlins*' young adult protagonist, it is largely on the basis of this ancillary merchandising that *Gremlins* is included here. Although Joe Dante's excessively violent "Christmas" movie was repeatedly criticized for its PG rating (and very instrumental in the creation of the new PG-13 rating), there would be little doubt that the movie was intended for children's consumption

instead listed the film's *distributor*, which acted, in the case of *Lady in White* as the nearest thing to a "production company" that the film had.

⁶ *Star Wars*, of course, does not stand alone as the prototypical blockbuster. It belongs in a cluster of mid-1970's films with, at the very least, Spielberg's *Jaws*, which inaugurated the "Blockbuster phenomenon." Lucas' film, however, is notable for its heavy emphasis on ancillary marketing—especially in toys—an important element of many films since then that hope to get a portion of the child audience.

⁷ Note that I differentiate here between "toys" and "collector's items," though *Star Wars* and *Gremlins* both spawned a number of each (and E-bay proves that even the toys have *become* collector's items over time). Horror films in general have a significant cult appeal that leads to the production of "toys" mainly aimed at adults—models, collector's cards, etc. These adult-oriented collector's items, however, are usually distinguished by a lack of moving parts and a certain delicacy. Children's toys, as I am defining them, are characterized by "playability," association with children's activities like school or trick-or-treat, and similarity to existing "toys" (board games, for instance).

even if it had received an R rating. *Gremlins* spawned stuffed toys, read-along book and record sets, school backpacks and pencil cases, remote control vehicles, and child-sized Halloween costumes. In conjunction with the film's opening, Hardee's fast food restaurants distributed *Gremlins* toys in their kids' meals. While this is not to say that *Gremlins* was uniquely a "kids' movie," it seems sufficient proof that children were intended to form a significant portion of the audience, an attitude that simply made good business sense. In fact, between 1977 and 1983, the value of the "licensed merchandise industry" doubled (Allen 118). The quest for the "kid" audience is especially no surprise when we consider the value of merchandising in conjunction with technological changes gearing up in this time period and the unique ways in which they privilege the child viewer.

Perhaps the most significant technological advance of the 1980s as far as the movie industry was concerned was the proliferation of the VCR. Fewer than 10% of all American households owned a VCR in 1983; by 1987, that statistic had jumped to more than half (Allen 111). Suddenly, more and more viewers were watching movies in their homes, a situation that would come, throughout the course of the 1980s, to greatly favor the children's fare already privileged by the powerful merchandising potential of goods marketed for kids. Perhaps the most important factor here is the child's tendency to watch the same movie again and again. Blockbuster production values had already led to a privileging of films that would be seen repeatedly, but not until the advent of sell-through video (in which films on video are marketed directly to the public) was it so important to create films that viewers (or perhaps more importantly, consumers) would want to see over and over. And it is the child who is most likely to want to engage in such a practice. Robert C. Allen, in his study of Hollywood's audiences, found that "[i]n households with children, kids influence or determine 75 per cent of household purchasing decisions. The single largest category of video purchases is parents buying videos for their children" (116). It was the

1980s that saw most of this rapid development. "Between 1983 and 1992, the number of feature films priced for sell-through increased at an average annual rate of 52 percent..." (113). It's hard to deny that it was partly an orientation toward the increasingly powerful child viewer that enabled Walt Disney Productions to go from a 3 percent market share to a 14 percent market share during the course of the 1980s (Wyatt 89).⁸ Though *Something Wicked This Way Comes* was a box-office flop, its video sales brought Disney over \$1 million (82).

Robin Wood, in his attack on 1980s Hollywood, quotes "Barthes' perception that rereading is tolerated in children" (163). Though Wood uses this reference to point up the "childishness" of this time period in cinema, there is little evidence for his argument that these films (*Star Wars* and *E.T.* among them) were "conceived and marketed largely for adults" (163). It would seem that what we are seeing is less an attempt to infantilize the adult viewer than an attempt to tap into a child market that industry pressures and changes in technology began to privilege more and more throughout the 1980s.

Product Differentiation

Justin Wyatt, in his study of the proliferation of "High Concept" films in the 1980s, places great importance on a film's image coherence, the quality of a film that enables it to secure and then live up to specific audience expectations. As fewer films get made and consequently seen, a film's ability to ensnare its target audience becomes more and more important. This ability to very quickly appeal to a particular audience relies heavily not only on a studio's marketing of each specific film but also its ability to consistently differentiate its product from that of other studios. For my purposes, I have considered "marketing" to be both advertising paid for by the studio (trailers, for instance) and interviews and other "entertainment news" items focusing on the film's stars.

⁸ I am well aware that one can also attribute a large part of this success to the formation of the largely adult-oriented Touchstone Pictures, but it seems notable that Disney had already begun its rise before the formation of Touchstone.



Figure 1. Above, an issue of *Dream Guys*, one of the many young teen magazines that Corey Haim and Corey Feldman appeared in during the late 1980s.

For Wyatt, Walt Disney Productions (along with Paramount) is the textbook case for the success of studio product differentiation. Wyatt quotes Richard Berger, president of Disney pictures, as saying, "People don't know who [which studio] made *Star Wars* or *Raiders*, but they can tell you who made *Tron*." (107). Maintaining this brand-name consistency was so important to Disney that they formed a separate arm, Touchstone Pictures, in 1984, specifically to enable the creation of more adult-oriented films (107). That year, Touchstone produced *Splash*, hardly a hard-core movie, but one the studio still considered too "adult" for the kid-friendly Disney image. Disney's pride in this image is significant for my purposes because it virtually pigeonholes both *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and *The Watcher in the Woods*, Disney's two 1980s horror films, as kids' movies, even though *The Watcher in the Woods*, rated PG, was originally released with a warning to parents to take the "parental guidance" rating seriously since small children might be frightened by the film. Indeed the film's trailer designates it first and foremost as a "spine-tingling thriller," but a spine-tingling thriller nonetheless put out by Walt Disney Pictures.

Other films depend a great deal more on direct and indirect marketing techniques in order to win an audience. *The Lost Boys*, for instance, depended largely on the strength of its stars, a group largely unknown outside of the young teenage audience collecting their *Tiger Beat* pinups. This does much to explain the foregrounding, in the movie's trailer, of the film's hottest "commodities," Jason Patric and Jamie Gertz, who had just appeared in *Solarbabies* (1986), an adolescent-targeted science fiction film about a group of kids fleeing a post-

apocalyptic orphanage, and Corey Feldman and Kiefer Sutherland, who had both just appeared in another, more successful kid-oriented picture, *Stand By Me*. Corey Haim was, along with Corey Feldman, already a staple of the young teenage pinup magazines, where *The Lost Boys* was promoted in heart-throb interviews with its young stars. This pre-sold quality might help to explain why Corey Feldman, a supporting comic relief player in the actual film, speaks almost a third of the lines in the trailer and why the two Corey's together make up for more than two-thirds of those lines. The remainder of the trailer focuses mostly on the film's special effects and music, two components likely to draw in



the other important audience for the film, older teenagers, especially boys.

Certainly, every film I have studied tried in some ways to address multiple audiences. While I have focused here on the films' attempts to draw

Clip 1. Below, a playable film clip of *The Lost Boys* Trailer. Click on the still to play the trailer

in a child or young teen audience, it is important to note that all of these films engaged in various methods of drawing audiences, and that as the 1980s continued, and the "new" requirements for a successful film began to be more and more familiar, films became more savvy in appealing to multiple audiences. While *The Watcher in the Woods* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* firmly established themselves as children's films through their association with Walt Disney productions, they also staked their hopes on aging Hollywood royalty (Bette Davis and Jason Robards, respectively) to appeal to parents and promoted their special effects in genre fan magazines like *Starlog* and *Cinefantastique*. *Gremlins*, which was also released in the first half of the decade, owes a great deal to the business sense of its producer, Stephen Spielberg, and was far more successful than either of Disney's entries into the genre.

Both *Gremlins* and *The Lost Boys* make significant efforts at cross-generational appeal. While both films include children as an audience and

make efforts to appeal to children, neither film has as focused an audience address as *The Watcher in the Woods* or *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, both of which seem to regard adult audiences as tangential. *Gremlins*, often shelved in video stores as a “comedy,” addresses several intertextual references to an adult audience, like the appearance of the robot from the 1960’s television series *Lost in Space*, the comparison between Mrs. Deagle and Ebenezer Scrooge, and the direct reference to *The Wizard of Oz* in Mrs. Deagle’s fight with Billy at the bank that ends with her line to Barney: “And as for you, you mangy cur, I’ll get you.” Children are unlikely to respond to the references to *It’s a Wonderful Life* or the comic appeal of the drunken gremlins dressed as 40’s gangsters and 50’s beatniks in the pub. Furthermore, *Gremlins* follows the familiar “boy gets girl” format of traditional Hollywood adventure-romances. Similarly, the numerous references to social conditions and civil rights unrest in the 1960’s in *Lady in White* are likely to fly above the heads of the children in the audience.

The Lost Boys, the most recent of the studio films that I examined, is most suggestive of this growing savvy. Marking itself as a teen movie in many ways, the film was promoted via special effects features in horror fan magazines like *Fangoria* as well as in young teen heart-throb magazines like *Tiger Beat*. *The Lost Boys* featured a heavily promoted rock music soundtrack, unique among these films, and drew attention in its promotional campaign to the romantic triangle plot designed to appeal to older teens. In addition, the film’s style was heavily influenced by the rock music video, a format that had recently become very popular among teenagers.

While all of these films are, to some degree, conscious of the presence of multiple audiences, and, in fact, the most successful of them attempt a vast cross-generational appeal, they are also all films that attempt in important ways to address children as an audience, both in their business decisions like

marketing and merchandising and through narrative devices like strong child protagonists.

Since a strong, sympathetic protagonist is so important to the child's enjoyment of a film, I will begin with a close look at the child as a protagonist and with the related question of the child as a figure and how this relates to a child audience and the question of identity. From there, I will move on to another issue of particular interest in children's films: the role of reassurance, especially as it relates to relationships with parents. The third main section will deal with questions of gender identity and the concept of the gaze as it is played out in these particular films.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHILD AS FIGURE AND PROTAGONIST

At the beginning of the 1980s, when the trailer for *Poltergeist* began playing in theatres, its tagline was “It knows what scares you,” but all America picked up what would eventually become the film’s claim to pop cultural fame, Heather O’Rourke’s line “They’re here,” and there’s little doubt that the face America most associated with *Poltergeist* was hers. But *Poltergeist* is not a movie targeted at the peers of its young star; it is an adult’s movie that features children. Aside from industry marketing codes like top billing (which went to Jo-Beth Williams in *Poltergeist*), the difference between a movie aimed at child audiences and one that features children for adult consumption lies in two key components of the narrative: which character a film privileges as a point of identification (often accomplished through point of view) and which character most shapes the narrative through personal agency. These qualities define the “protagonist” of a film. Our sense that *Poltergeist* is ultimately Diane Freeling’s (Jo-Beth Williams) story comes largely from the fact that it’s through Diane’s eyes that we see the movie. We care about Carol Ann because Diane cares about her, and when Carol Ann disappears for the middle portion of the film, it is because she has disappeared for Diane. We don’t go into the void with Carol Ann. We stay in the house with her mother. To complicate matters, if you’re a child looking for someone to identify with, the film also disposes of Carol Ann’s slightly older brother, Robbie, during the film’s long penultimate climax by shipping him off to his grandmother’s.

Of course, it is often not so simple to define a film’s protagonist. Successful films, especially since the rise of Krämer’s “family adventure movie,” try to include “something for everyone,” permitting a multitude of identification points and a multitude of interpretations. *The Lost Boys* divides its narrative loyalty between two main characters, offering a central point of identification for both pubescent youngsters and older teenagers. Charles Halloway is a significant

and sympathetic character in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. It is perhaps because of this quest for multiple audiences that many of the films I've examined set their child-centered narratives in the past. If *Lady in White* is Frankie Scarlatti's story, at least Frankie Scarlatti's universe is one adults can relate to as their own past. It is here that Robin Wood's thesis about the infantilization of the adult audience makes the most sense. If parents are hardly given the chance to identify meaningfully with child characters in the present (and to be truthful, this is often the case), they are given that chance with characters like Will Halloway and Frankie Scarlatti, whose worlds are firmly coded as (highly idealized versions of) the past. There is certainly something to be said, though, for Krämer's notion that childhood, as envisioned in these films, is hardly an experience anyone would want to participate in (297). In fact, I would propose that one of the great draws for children in the children's horror film is the way that these films externalize and make deadly serious the sorts of dilemmas that children face and take very seriously everyday and that are often shrugged off by adults.

In truth, it is much easier to include movies than it is to *exclude* them. We have little difficulty accepting Frankie as the protagonist of *Lady in White*. We see the action almost entirely through his eyes (noticeably so in a great many cases), he is the character who moves the narrative forward, and Lukas Haas has top billing in the film. As the audience, we spend the movie with Frankie, and the movie is often dreamlike and magical. It is clearly a child's movie, and Frankie is a child's protagonist—brave, compassionate, smart, and downtrodden. Of course, the same could be said of Danny Torrance of *The Shining* and Charlie McGee of *Firestarter* (1984). I would propose that the difference lies in more than just how much trauma children can tolerate on the screen (although there is an element of such limits involved, and certainly the MPAA recognizes them). As Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out in his study of children's reactions to fairy tales, it is imperative for children that the central

character be “attractive” to them as a point of identification. Children don’t identify with a character based on that character’s goodness or even his or her ability to triumph, but because the character’s predicament is one the child can identify with: “The question for the child is not ‘Do I want to be good,’ but ‘Who do I want to be like?’ The child decides this on the basis of projecting himself wholeheartedly into one character” (10). Although we see most of *The Shining* from Danny’s viewpoint, Danny is a fundamentally unattractive character for children to identify with. He hardly speaks throughout much of the movie, and he has very few successful interactions with other characters. Although the film permits Danny a certain unavoidable power, that power resides in the implication that Danny could be the cause of the Overlook’s assault. Such a suggestion is subtle, distressing, and likely to be missed by most children, especially those Danny’s own age who would be most likely to identify with him. In addition, the fact that Danny survives the film hardly seems to ameliorate his status as a “victim.” In short, unlike the child protagonists of films like *Gremlins* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Danny doesn’t “win”; he survives.⁹

Firestarter’s Charlie McGee is a more attractive character for children to identify with. She’s cute, precocious and brave, and unlike Danny, Charlie does more than just survive the narrative. Charlie, however, like Carol Ann, is a child with a great deal of power but very little agency. Ultimately, Charlie becomes, for the film, less a point of identification than a bargaining chip. Though Charlie comes, throughout the course of the film, to develop control over herself and her powers, she relies on her father and Rainbird to tell her what to do. The tension of the film, the central conflict, resides less in whether Charlie will win or not than in which of them will win Charlie. Although Charlie does eventually

⁹ *The Shining* also refuses to deflect its Oedipal tensions in any way. While one could make a case that *Lady in White* is equally violent, it reduces the psychic trauma to Oedipal-stage children by projecting the Oedipal conflict onto a character who is not the father. This is something I will discuss later on.

“come into her own” at the end of the film, children are likely to subconsciously react against Charlie’s role in the film, that of being a weapon in other people’s hands.

The Child As a Figure

Although I have put a great deal of emphasis on the protagonist whose chronological age matches that of the child in the audience, I don’t mean to imply that children only identify with other children. Children, as Bettelheim points out, identify with anyone whose predicament, on some level, matches their own. One need only look at *Cinderella* (1950) and *Snow White* (1937), as they are imagined by Walt Disney, to see that the child has little problem identifying with an adult who is child-like in lifestyle and obstacles. Of the films I studied, it is *Gremlins* that most addresses issues of what makes a child identify with a lead character, and as such it is *Gremlins* that deals most directly and intriguingly with questions of what it means to be a child.

In 1984, when Zach Galligan played Billy Peltzer in *Gremlins*, he was 20 years old, but the film clearly codes Billy as a child (at least up until a certain crucial point, which I intend to discuss). The film begins, not with Billy, but with Billy’s father, Rand, whose voice-over provides the frame for the film. Tellingly, Dante resists showing us Billy until he has established Billy as a “kid.” Our first indication that Billy even exists is in the first line of the story Rand begins telling: “I was hittin’ the shops, trying to move a little merchandise, maybe find a present for my kid.” By the time we see Billy, who’s taller than virtually anyone else in the film, we are predisposed to think of him as a child. Granted, of course, Billy makes a better kid than he does an adult in many ways. He lives at home with his parents, sleeps in the attic with the family dog, collects comic books and pals around with Pete, played by 13-year-old Corey Feldman. It is not insignificant then that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* plays such an important intertextual role in the film. Billy is a liminal character, physically an adult and with adult

responsibilities, but coded in many ways as a child, just as *Snow White's* dwarfs are physically small and playful like children, but with the facial features and working lifestyle of adults.

The fact that Billy works to support the family seems to reflect Rand's inadequacy more than it does Billy's maturity. One of the ways, in fact, that *Gremlins* toys with the idea of what it means to be a child is by toying with the idea of what it means to work. The film is almost devoid of "adult" characters who work in the traditional sense. Rand is an inventor, so he works at home and then travels about. Most of what we actually see him doing more closely resembles play; he certainly doesn't seem to be working at the inventor's conference that he is attending for most of the film. Lynn is a housewife. Mr. Fudderman drives the town's snow plow, but one has to wonder what he does for the rest of the year. Even Mrs. Deagle, the film's iconic "adult," sits back in the tradition of the capitalist investor, and simply makes money. Although there are adult characters with jobs, like the police officers and the teacher, none of them seem to work very hard at their jobs or to have many people to answer to. Virtually the only characters in the film who do work in the traditional sense are those of Billy's generation and younger. Pete's father sells Christmas trees, but it's Pete who has to carry them to the customers' homes. Billy and Kate both work at the bank, but both also live with their parents. While having jobs does make these characters seem more mature than their elders in many cases, it would also seem to indicate a sense of being tied to the originating family, and it is not holding down a job here that makes the adult. It is an unusual inversion, but as Gerald implies to Billy in the bar, it is precisely because of the job, precisely because of his adult responsibilities, that Billy can't succeed: "You're practically supporting your whole family."

The narrative trajectory of *Gremlins* is particularly apt for discussing the child protagonist since Billy's status as a child (in fact, the status of the child as a figure) is clearly at issue in the film, and this status shifts as the narrative

progresses. While the film begins with the simple indication that Rand has a “kid,” that category begins to be complicated from the very first time we see Billy. The film, after all, may code Billy as a child, but, by the physical standards we usually use to define children, he clearly isn’t one, and from Gizmo’s initial

Figure 2. Below, Billy holds the mogwai like a baby.



introduction into the family, Billy is displaced as the child in the context of the family unit. Billy holds the mogwai like a baby, and when Gizmo falls into the trashcan and cuts his head, Billy bandages his wound like any good mother.¹⁰ After Billy receives his Christmas gift (at which point Rand is promptly excised from the film except for randomly inserted comic relief segments), and Billy begins to build a

romantic relationship with Kate, Gizmo begins to usurp Billy’s powerful place as the child in the film.

And *Gremlins* is a film in which being a child is a powerful position. The particular satisfaction that a child might find in it is located in its ability to upset the traditional cultural system of dominance. The most dangerous thing one can have in the *Gremlins* universe is authority. The teacher is the first to go, but the gremlins also have particular luck with priests and police officers, and they make a shambles of the bank. Those who can defend themselves do so with the icons of childishness (like Pete picking off gremlins from his bedroom window with his slingshot) or traditional femininity (like Lynn, in perhaps *Gremlins*’ most notorious scene, killing gremlins one by one with kitchen appliances, most

¹⁰ It is perhaps important to note, in the context of the film’s value structure, that Billy is always a parent entirely without authority. Gizmo doesn’t seem to need much guidance, but Billy is incapable of controlling the “new” mogwai. They make messes, engage in cruel practical jokes, and finally trick Billy into feeding them after midnight, all without any cross word from Billy.

notably the knife she's been frosting Christmas cookies with).¹¹ In addition, the gremlins themselves are coded as children. The film proper (after Rand's prologue in Chinatown) begins with scenes of children making playful mischief, and this motif carries through with the gremlins' playful attitudes toward their own malicious mischief. They play darts with Gizmo, spawn in a public swimming pool, love to play dress up, and are finally cornered by their fascination with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. It is perhaps partly because the gremlins themselves come gradually to be associated with children that Gizmo himself has to become the child hero.¹² As Billy works at completing his Oedipal trajectory, at becoming a man, he gradually loses dominance, while Gizmo begins to gain power. In the end, after Billy and Kate kiss, Billy loses all power to defeat Stripe. It is, in fact, only Stripe's drive to reproduce that prevents him from killing Billy.¹³ It is Gizmo who finally defeats Stripe. (And it is surely not coincidental that Gizmo arrives on the scene in a Barbie Corvette—not only a toy, but a girl's toy to boot.) By the end of the film, when Gizmo is returned to his proper "father," Billy and Kate standing on the porch mirror Rand and Lynn standing directly behind them, and this time Rand's voiceover is presented over a close-up of Billy's face, implying that some sort of torch has been passed. Of course, Rand's failures as a father would imply that this torch-passing may not be a positive event.

The Relationship Between Children and Adults

Gary Heba's work on the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series foregrounds the importance of the adolescent as hero. Though Heba's points very clearly concern teenagers, it seems relevant and worthwhile to extend them, in some

¹¹ Mrs. Deagle is a special case. I specify traditional femininity here in part to except Mrs. Deagle, who is a particular type of female character, one I will go into at length in connection with a few other films later on.

¹² This is an important theme, and I take it up in more detail later in the section entitled "*Gremlins and The Monster Within*"

¹³ Stripe is also by far the most "adult" of the gremlins—the only one in fact that seems to have a "goal." It seems entirely too appropriate that Stripe's fatal mistake is brought on by his drive to reproduce.

ways, to children, since the appellation "other," as Heba uses it to denote a subculture at odds with the adult world, can as easily be applied to children as to teenagers:¹⁴

[T]hese movies always show a transition, a rite of passage, which transforms subservient young people into independent ideological identities who are capable of resolving their own problems in new ways. In fact, the rite of passage in the *Nightmare* movies may provide a vicarious sense of empowerment for the young people who watch them because the movies depict teenagers resisting codes and taking control of situations that sources of authority cannot or will not help them with.

One of the things that distinguishes many children's horror films is the child protagonist's inability to get help from authorities. Those with real power over the child very often do not believe the horror is real. Many of these films actually include a scene to this effect. "Good kids," these films imply, almost always turn to authorities as their first resort, and in these films those authorities almost always laugh them off. *Gremlins'* Billy Pelzer goes to the police station, only to be laughed at for tales of "little monsters." *The Lost Boys'* Sam goes to his mother, only to be chased out of the shop where she works. In *The Watcher in the Woods*, Jan's parents simply don't believe her, while most of the other adults she encounters are, like the parents in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, openly hostile because they have something to hide. Adults who do recognize the horror and agree to help are generally regarded as anomalies and are often themselves presented as "other." Both Mrs. Aylwood of *The Watcher in the Woods* and

¹⁴ Heba is also very much concerned with the phenomenon of youth identifying with the monster, a theme I take up later.

Amanda in *Lady in White* are recluses cast aside and openly derided by the dominant culture. Grandpa in *The Lost Boys* is a hopeless eccentric, and the old Chinese Grandfather in *Gremlins* is separated from the mainstream by his ethnic culture. Charles Halloway is repeatedly cast as an outsider because he's "old," and his privileged position in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is at least partly the result of his willingness to believe Will and Jim, something the film takes as remarkable enough to comment on:

🔊) Will: But who'd believe us?

Charles: I do.

Jim: You do?! But we're not grown-ups!

Charles: That's why I believe you.

Even the most credulous authority figure, however, must realize that the trappings and methods of authority are useless. While Mr. Hanson, the science teacher, may believe in the mogwai, his commitment to the dominant (in this case scientific) method renders him inadequate to deal with the gremlins. Charles Halloway's books, the site of so much adult authority, serve as little protection against Mr. Dark in the library scene. Science and history are useless against these horrors.

Children, therefore, like the teenage characters of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, must approach and solve their problems on their own, using their own tools and methods. Thus, Edgar and Allen learn to survive the vampires, not from the arcane texts that are the staple of traditional vampire movies, but from horror comics. Will and Jim must turn Mr. Dark's carnival, that inverted childhood fantasy-land, against him, and Jan Curtis must convince a group of adults to re-enact a childhood game in order to save Karen Aylwood. Children must also form alliances only with those who, like them, are denied power by the dominant culture, like the elderly and the insane. Like the teenagers that Heba is writing about, these children must "ignore all directives from the dominant culture's authorities" (para. 13). Geno Scarlatti must disobey and go into his

father's trunk in search of the clue that will reveal the killer and save Frankie. Billy Pelzer must ignore the police officer's instructions to "go home...and open your Christmas presents." Just as Heba points out in the *Nightmare* films, those adult characters that do prove helpful are those who are not only most akin to children in their alienation from the dominant culture but those most able and willing to accept and adapt to new methods and scenarios—especially those that belong to the child's world—things like carousels and music boxes.¹⁵

Adolescence and Sexual Maturation

If in many of these films adulthood is figured in terms of authority, in *The Lost Boys*, it is figured in terms of sexual desire. On the first night that *The Lost Boys*' Sam and Michael "hit the streets" in their new home of Santa Carla, shortly before Michael will come into contact with the vampires and nearly become one himself, Sam tosses off a line to Michael that could well stand as an epigraph for the film: "You're at the mercy of your sex glands, bud." As the rest of the film will prove, virtually everyone here is at the mercy of his or her sex glands—everyone, that is, except the film's pre-pubescent heroes. In its favoring of pre-sexual characters, *The Lost Boys* is not so different from the slasher movies of the era, but if "sex equals death" in the slasher films, sex here equals something slightly different. The film's tagline, after all, was "Sleep All Day. Party All Night. It's Fun to Be a Vampire."

Repeatedly throughout the film, Michael's transformation into a vampire is figured in terms that are unmistakably both adolescent and cautionary. He stays out all night and wears his sunglasses in the house. He buys a leather motorcycle jacket and is rude to his mother's dates. "Are you freebasing?" Sam asks him. "Enquiring minds want to know." As far as his family is concerned, Michael isn't turning into a vampire; he's turning into a problem teenager, and

¹⁵ In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, this ability reads simply as a willingness to believe in magic and in evil. It is interesting, though, that very often, as in the cases of *The Lost Boys*' Grandpa and *The Watcher in the Woods*' Mrs. Aylwood, this quality reads as an eccentricity bordering on sheer craziness.

even if there were no vampires in this movie, we would know what's coming next: Michael either has to be punished or redeemed.

The vampires are figured from the very beginning of the film as an adolescent gang. They dress alike, defy authority, and harass women. They are the sort of teenage boys who routinely get kicked out of places, and their introductory scene ends with their being kicked off the Santa Carla boardwalk—again. Even the details of Michael's initiation into the gang play like the peer pressure sequences of an after-school special. Before he's ever transformed, this teenage gang has already got him driving too fast, trespassing, and smoking marijuana. The blood that will turn him into a fledgling vampire is served, not insignificantly, as wine, and offered with the promise of initiation. "Have some, Michael," David says. "Be one of us." Michael is simply falling in with the wrong crowd. Of course, the film leaves him little in the way of other options. Michael's first question upon arriving in Santa Carla is "Any jobs around here?" The answer? "Nothing legal." Michael's attempts to come of age without getting into trouble are constantly thwarted. If he wants a job, he has to be willing to do something illegal, and if he wants a girlfriend, he has to join the vampires to get her. Like the setting of *Gremlins*, Santa Carla is a world in which adulthood, or the attempt to get there, is a dangerous proposition.

And an enormous part of "growing up" in *The Lost Boys* is figured as sexual desire. The entrapment of the film's adult characters, both Michael and Lucy, follows a familiar pattern: sex is the bait, reproduction the goal. Sam and his vampire hunter friends are immune only because they are immune to the bait itself. They are not yet "at the mercy of their sex glands." For Michael, heterosexual desire leads ultimately to the threat of dangerous homosocial affiliation. Though the film is clear that it is because of Starr that Michael joins the gang, it is David who is most intent on keeping him in it. Like Dracula, David is a mélange of heterosexual and homoerotic qualities. Though there's little indication of direct homosexual activity among the vampire gang (indeed

David usually seems to be threateningly heterosexual), there is at least a strong homosocial atmosphere among them, and their lair is prominently decked with a large poster of a shirtless Jim Morrison. Though Starr acts as a buffer and bargaining chip between them, the sexual tension between David and Michael is unmistakable, notably in the many scenes where Schumacher chooses to shoot their faces in very close physical proximity. Indeed, it is not so much Starr's seductiveness that the film plays up as it is David's. It is David, not Starr, who gets lines like, "How far you willing to go, Michael?"

Ultimately, however, the film backs down from its homosexual undertones, and the possibility of this theme is left to audience interpretation. After all, Michael's sexual attraction is clearly to Starr, and their relationship is actually consummated (although, tellingly, Michael goes to the lair that night in search of David). The film is unclear about David's intentions toward Michael; although he encourages Michael to make his first kill and become a full vampire, Starr later claims that David intended for Michael to be her first kill. But the film is quite clear on the fact that for Michael to succumb entirely to David's "advances" would mean either death or full initiation.

The vampire narrative, when it is so clearly metaphorically attached to maturation and sexual desire, provides quite possibly the clearest and most obvious method for dealing with the trials of "growing up," especially through the use of a focal character who is in the process of *becoming* a vampire. It can hardly be unintentional that Lucy mistakes Michael's dramatic personality changes for simple growing pains. In many ways, they are just that: the emergence of a strong, alien physical drive, one that Sam is immune to precisely because he is too young, because he chooses the asexual atmosphere of the comic book store over the sexually charged atmosphere of the boardwalk.

The Monster Within

Sometimes, however, to be a child means more than to envision oneself the hero. When Billy and Pete take one of the Gremlin cocoons to the school science teacher to examine, he declares that the creature has entered a “pupal stage.” Inside the cocoon, the Mogwai is changing. It’s telling that the film selects this particular way of describing what the Mogwai is going through, since there are other equally scientific ways of describing this phase—including the more familiar “metamorphic stage.” But none would resonate quite so loudly in a classroom as “pupal,” with its links to the more familiar word, “pupil.” This choice of terms is one of the most subtle in a series of moves in which the film explicitly codes the gremlins themselves as children. I have already discussed some of these moves, since they have a significant impact on the way the film inverts authority to grant strength to its “children.” This marking of the gremlins as children, however, serves another important purpose in the film: it works along with the “metamorphosis theme” to create a common dichotomy in which villain and hero are bound up together as one. Bettelheim outlines the prevalent theme of fairy tales as one in which the “victory is...mainly [over]one’s own [villainy] which is projected as the hero’s antagonist” (128). While this theme is common in films across genres, it is perhaps more significant in the children’s horror film because of these films’ interest in where the monstrous comes from and because children are particularly tormented by their own darker sides. The child, Bettelheim tells us, sometimes “feels or fears himself to be [a monster]” (120). The gremlins’ genesis, then, becomes particularly important (to say nothing just yet of where they focus their murderous rage).

When Rand gets the Mogwai in Chinatown, the animal comes with three rules: keep it out of the light, don’t get it wet, and don’t feed it after midnight. We learn in the early portion of the film what happens when the rules are broken. Light hurts it, water makes it reproduce, and feeding it after midnight turns it into a monster. The rules are the sort of stock fairy tale fare we are all

familiar with.¹⁶ They are significant only in that they allow for their own breaking and the fact that they come with *Gizmo*, the original mogwai—the *good* one, arguably the film’s hero. Gizmo holds the seeds of destruction in himself, and the emergence of the “new” mogwai from Gizmo’s body is something we’re treated to on-screen, so it’s perfectly clear, even to a child, that the new mogwai *come from* Gizmo. Furthermore, we’re led to believe that Gizmo knows, when Billy inadvertently feeds the new mogwai in the middle of the night, what is about to happen, but he does nothing to stop or warn Billy.¹⁷ It is especially important, therefore, that Gizmo be the one to kill Stripe in the end, thus ending the Gremlin rampage. Stripe, in a very real way, *belongs* to Gizmo. He is Gizmo’s dark other half, the evil born, quite literally, from out of Gizmo’s body.¹⁸ And the fact that the rules come with Gizmo (the injunction, after all, is “never feed *him* after midnight”) makes it quite clear that Gizmo too is capable of the pupal stage. There is a Gremlin even in him. All that protects Gizmo from Billy’s irresponsibility is his own restraint. Gizmo *won’t* eat after midnight. He embodies on the most transparent level what Bettelheim calls the true “moral” of fairy tales: “that one rules oneself wisely” (128).

While this theme is most clear and prevalent in *Gremlins*, it is common to some degree throughout the children’s horror films I’ve examined. The title character, the “watcher,” of *The Watcher in the Woods* takes up residence in Ellie’s body. It is, in fact, only as Ellie that we ever see the watcher. It would appear to have no body but hers. *The Lost Boys’* Michael, true to the film’s vampire legacy, is a liminal character, clearly embodying both hero and villain.

¹⁶ Dante himself has said that the rules are purely arbitrary and that his original instinct was to question them, but he decided against it: “[W]e realized the force of the movie comes from the fact that these are a certain set of givens that are like a fairy tale” (Lofficier 131).

¹⁷ I am taking this mostly from Gizmo’s facial expression at the end of the scene. Since the mogwai was not played by a real actor, and his facial expressions took a remarkable amount of effort and technology to produce, it seems obvious to me that this was intentional (Martin 45).

¹⁸ It could certainly be argued that Gizmo is, in this relationship, Stripe’s father, although the fact that Stripe is born from Gizmo’s body would favor characterizing him instead as Stripe’s *mother*, yet another layer in the complex web of relationships concerning parents and children in *Gremlins*.

Again, it is only through his own restraint that he resists the urge to become a full vampire—and thus truly become the villain. Like Gizmo, Michael simply refuses to “feed.”

Gary Heba discusses the ways in which the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films foreground the protagonists’ similarity to the monster, saying “there is always an ideological kinship of ‘otherness’ between youth and the monster, which may partially explain the popularity of horror movies among younger audiences—they can identify with the monster because it, too stands outside and apart from the members of the dominant culture” (para. 10). I would argue that there is a kinship between monster and hero in many children’s horror films that goes beyond simply a mutual “otherness” and that it has to do with the monster’s particular “achievements.”

William Paul, in a brief study of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), specifies Hannibal Lecter’s role at the end of the film as “facilitat[ing] the splitting off of Clarice’s anger at Chilton, so that she herself neither has to acknowledge it nor act on it” (428). This is a role that the gremlins are particularly suited to. At the opening of *Gremlins*, the Pelzers are broke, Mrs. Deagle is about to kill their dog and evict them from their house, and Billy is just on the verge of getting fired by his boss at the bank. Four days later, Mrs. Deagle is dead, the bank is a ruin, Rand Pelzer is home, and Billy has succeeded in winning the girl. There is, for children, an undoubtedly clear form of wish-fulfillment at work here. There is certainly a level on which the “villains” of *Gremlins* are not the gremlins at all, but the much more prosaic demons of everyday life: authority figures, parental abandonment, and lack of confidence in oneself. The gremlins might be dangerous, but they are certainly most dangerous to Billy’s enemies. It is when Billy himself enters this dominant mainstream (significantly, the film figures this as the moment he “gets the girl”) that the gremlins must be disposed of.

The film does not, however, manage the perfect ideological closure that the gremlins’ role as avenging furies would suggest. The Chinese Grandfather’s

final line to Billy is, "Someday, you may be ready. Until then, Mogwai will be waiting." Certainly, Gizmo's treatment throughout the film makes this line a benign and hopeful one on the surface, but as the Chinese Grandfather carries Gizmo away, Gizmo starts to sing, not his previous tuneless coo, but a plainly recognizable song previously associated only with the gremlins, "Hi-Ho." The evil cannot be destroyed because it resides in the very body of goodness.

To some extent, all of these films raise the same sorts of questions, however briefly, about the monster within. Frankie Scarlatti's first appearance as a child is as the monster, just like Michael Myers' first introduction in *Halloween*. Frankie is wearing a vampire Halloween mask when we first see him. He is the anti-Michael Myers. Rather than the child killer, he is the child about to be hunted, and the mask is more significant than this brief startling moment at the beginning of the film. It is the mask of the monster that prevents Phil from recognizing Frankie in the cloakroom, so in some ways it is the mask that begins the entire narrative. When Frankie and Phil first meet in this context, it is momentarily as monster against monster, raising questions about what we consider the monster to be. Geno also appears in a monster mask at one point in the film as does Ellie in *The Watcher in the Woods*.

In *The Lost Boys*, aside from the very liminal character of Michael, there is the more intriguing character of Laddie, never a full vampire, who raises questions about the monster within the child.

These questions are most neatly condensed in the scene near the end of the film when the Frog brothers are preparing to kill Laddie. Starr blocks their path, screaming, "Get away from him! He's just a little boy!" The camera lingers just long enough to show us how much trouble Starr is having holding Laddie back. He hisses and growls like an angry dog. (It's difficult not to see this brief



Clip 2. Above, a playable film clip of Laddie, not "just a little boy." Click on the still to play the clip.

scene in the context of Max's later statement to Lucy that "Boys need a mother.") Laddie may be a little boy, but he's clearly not *just* a little boy; he's also the monster. The point the film makes, that Laddie can be saved from being the monster, returned to a state of being "just a little boy," is reassuring to children, who do sometimes feel themselves to be a monster.

Ellie Curtis fulfills a similar role in *The Watcher in the Woods*. Though Ellie's "possession" seems for the most part to be benign, it still provides children with a convenient metaphor, one without the disturbing graphic violence inherent in other child possession narratives like *The Shining* and *The Exorcist*, for their own "monster within." Bettelheim writes of bed-wetters who, the next morning, describe the experience as, "Somebody's wet my bed," not in order to deflect blame, but because they genuinely no longer recognize this part of themselves: "The 'somebody' who has done it is that part of himself with which he has by now parted company" (69).

It is *Something Wicked This Way Comes* that perhaps succeeds most in this dividing of the main character. The film clearly codes the two boys, Will Halloway and Jim Nightshade, as two halves of a whole, one born just before midnight, the other just after on the same night. Will describes Jim as, "my best friend, my blood brother." As in the Sinbad story that Bettelheim explicates, both characters are attractive, but of opposite natures (83-86). Jim embodies all that is adventurous, and Will the self-control required to keep that adventurousness in check. If Bettelheim is correct, children are capable of recognizing that in saving Jim, Will also saves himself. While Jim Nightshade is far from the actual "monster" of the film, he is the one most associated with Mr. Dark, and the one who, but for Will and Charles, would ultimately succumb to the carnival. Jim may not be a monster, but he is certainly portrayed as Will's "darker" side.

CHAPTER 3

NARRATIVES OF REASSURANCE

Lady in White is an exception to many of the patterns I've developed here. The film had little promotion and nothing in the way of tie-in merchandising. The only industry-related decision to indicate that the film is intended for child viewing is the fierce protest that LaLoggia lodged against the film's original R rating. With no further cuts, LaLoggia protested the rating and resubmitted the film, specifically stating in his protest that he felt that adults were assuming that, since it was disturbing to them, it would be disturbing to children. He emphasized in his protest what a positive child character he found Frankie to be. And LaLoggia got his PG-13 rating.

Indeed, the film's narrative trajectory greatly resembles that of a fairy tale. Frankie begins the film in the position of Bettelheim's "simpleton," the younger brother, teased and picked on by his peers. In addition, Frankie's mother has died, a frequent trope in fairy tales, and Frankie's quest throughout the film is to reunite another child with her lost mother, specifically by killing the film's "monster." LaLoggia himself has admitted to attempting to give the film a fairy tale "feel" through lighting tricks and set design.¹⁹ The film is rife with childhood fears and conflicts dealing with the parent, and for the most part it deals with all of them reassuringly: the fear of abandonment, the fear of losing a parent, and the Oedipal conflict are all represented.²⁰

¹⁹ LaLoggia notes that although much of the film was shot outdoors on location, the woods that serve as a setting for much of the film's action had to be designed as a set specifically so they would set the proper fairy tale atmosphere. Real woods would have been, apparently, too real.

²⁰ It is in this discussion that Bettelheim's (and indeed even Freud's) ahistorical approach begins to most clearly come into conflict with the historical and cultural methods of film production. While I have depended on psychoanalytical theories throughout my work, at least partly because I am dealing with a particular age and stage of development, I don't mean to imply that these films in any way rise above their conditions of production in the same way that Bettelheim would like to imply that fairy tales do. All works of art of are, as a result of their conditions of production, necessarily historical and cultural in nature. If these films bear a certain resemblance to fairy tales and if they reply in many ways to the sorts of psychological conflicts that Freud mapped out, I find it entirely likely that they do so, on some level, intentionally. But while they may deal rather explicitly with what seem to be ahistorical psychological conflicts,

After a prologue of the adult Frankie returning home, and the introduction of the characters and setting, the film's primary action begins with Frankie being locked in the school cloakroom and abandoned by two of his classmates as a Halloween prank. This shot of Frankie sitting on the cloakroom shelf served as the film's "image" in marketing. It was used as the closing shot in the film's trailer and as the image for the movie poster, and the shot does seem to embody one of the central tensions of the film. Frankie feels abandoned by his dead mother (who says to him in a dream sequence, "How could I ever leave you?") and he's repeatedly abandoned by his friends, who leave him not only in the school cloakroom but also at the mercy of (who they believe to be) the lady in white. Later in the film, he's abandoned by Geno (however unintentionally) when Geno cuts his foot while the two of them are chasing the ghost Melissa. This sense of abandonment, however, is always ameliorated. Frankie doesn't have to survive his cloakroom adventure on his own because his father comes looking for him, and at the end of the film, it's his father who saves him. Thus, Frankie can be reassured that he is never truly abandoned, and the child viewer, identifying as he does with Frankie, is reassured as well.²¹

Another childhood fear that the film deals with is that of the loss of a parent, a very specific form of the fear of abandonment. LaLoggia himself has said that he believes the film to be one about loss and about recovery. *Lady in*

these films are also deeply entangled in their own historical and cultural matrix, a culture and a point in history which was particularly grappling with the growing dissolution of the very patriarchal systems on which Freudian theories rest.

²¹ One could certainly choose to read this tendency in the film as *unsettling* rather than reassuring since even though Frankie is always saved, he is also constantly being abandoned. While I don't reject other interpretations wholesale and I do see the tension created by the repetition of this abandonment, it seems to me that one possible reason that the film deliberately sets up repeated abandonment scenarios only to escape them via Frankie's father is for the very reassurance this creates for children. Recreating the same fear repeatedly and then assuaging it is common in psychological phobia therapy.

White is arguably the least like a horror film of any of the films I've studied.²² Most of the scenes that don't directly include a threat to Frankie are strangely devoid of the narrative tension we associate with horror. Most of Frankie's scenes alone with Melissa are magical rather than scary, even for children, who are apt to be frightened of any film ghost, even a benign one. It is striking, then, that it is *Lady in White* that deals the most directly with death, especially murder. Other than *The Lost Boys*, it has the highest "body count" of any of these films. Aside from the unnamed previous victims of the child murderer, four characters that affect the film's action are dead when the film begins, and there are three deaths during the course of the film, all of them shown on-screen. In addition, the film includes a funeral scene and replays the deaths of the two ghosts. The main thrust of Frankie's quest in the film is to reunite Melissa, a motherless child like himself, with her mother. Although the film never goes so far into fantasy as to suggest that Frankie can bring back his own mother, there is reassurance in the fact that such a reunion is possible since Melissa and her mother end the film together. There is also significant reassurance for children in the knowledge that Melissa's mother did not intend to abandon her. Since we, like Frankie, have seen and heard parts of the story that Melissa cannot, we know that Melissa's mother, the lady in white, is also looking for Melissa. As LaLoggia puts it, "Thematically...the core of the film [is that] Frankie reunites the little girl with her mother, and hopefully as a result comes to terms with the loss of his mother and can now move on."

But perhaps the most significant theme in the film is the reassuring way in which it deals with the Oedipal conflict. Indeed, it may be more appropriate to refer to this conflict as the film figures it as the "father-son" conflict, since the film drains any sexual power away from the Oedipal conflict by absenting the mother from the film entirely. We see Frankie with his mother only once, in a

²² LaLoggia says that he doesn't see *Lady in White* "as a horror film," although his necessity to say this implies that the film tends to be viewed as one. Although the film has its comic moments, LaLoggia doesn't feel the need to tell us that he doesn't see it as a comedy.

dream sequence, and the film offers no indication that Frankie blames his father for his mother's absence. In fact, Frankie doesn't seem to blame his father for anything. The greatest reassurance that the film manages may be this transference of any Oedipal resentment to a character whose position is so close to that of the father that he is more than just another character; he is very pointedly *not the father*. Bettelheim discusses a similar mechanism at work in fairy tales that deal with evil step-parents: "What more suitable object of vengeful thoughts than the person who has usurped the parent's place: the fairy-story evil step-parent? If one vents vicious fantasies of revenge against such an evil usurper, there is no reason to feel guilty or need to fear retaliation, because that figure clearly deserves it" (134). Freud himself points out that hatred and fear of the father must in some way be displaced in order to deal with the guilt involved. *Lady in White* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* both accomplish this by splitting the father into two separate characters, combining themes of the usurper (which Bettelheim associates only with female Oedipal conflicts—stepmothers, never stepfathers) and themes of the doubting parent (whom Bettelheim never tags as explicitly evil).²³

In both films, the primary villain is presented as a pretender father. Mr. Dark arrives virtually in response to Jim's statement that his father will come back. In the library scene in which Mr. Dark tries to tempt the boys to come to him, he tells Jim, "I'm the father you've been waiting for, my son," and offers Jim the quintessential father's legacy, partnership in the family business. Most clearly, in a telling juxtaposition of scenes near the film's climax, Will is shown in embrace with his father just before the camera cuts to a scene of Mr. Dark and Jim in which Mr. Dark again calls the boy "my son." This pair of scenes in

²³ Bettelheim does deal with fairy tales that split the father into two separate characters but they are stories of the loving and *rejecting* sides (in which the point of the narrative is not to seek violent revenge on the father, but to prove the rejecting father wrong in his low opinion of the protagonist). Boys' fairy tales, as Bettelheim figures them, exile any image of the "good father," replacing the father with some explicitly evil character like a dragon. These films seem to combine elements of the "split father" fairy tale with elements of the *female* Oedipal fairy tale.

particular points up the physical resemblances between characters, the fair-haired Holloways, and Dark and Nightshade, with their mutually darker hair and eyes. This resemblance is something the viewer has already been inclined to notice, since Jim asks his mother earlier in the movie if he looks like his father. We



Clip 3 Above, a playable film clip of the juxtaposition of scenes emphasizing "fathers and sons." Click on the still to play the clip.

have only her word for the fact that he does, but we can certainly see that he looks like Mr. Dark. Mrs. Nightshade also confuses Mr. Dark with Jim's father when she comes to the carnival in response to a note, presumably from Harry to meet him there. It is Charles Holloway who must tell her, "The man who's coming for you is not your husband."

This same establishment of a father-son relationship is accomplished in *Lady in White* with a long, tense scene in which Phil is teaching Frankie to shoot the bow and arrow he has given him as a get-well gift. While Frankie's relationship with his father is in every way presented as positive, there is no scene between Frankie and Angelo comparable in intimacy to this scene between Frankie and Phil. The gift of the bow and arrow is the epitome of a father's gift to his son; a weapon is so often the symbol of a boy's coming-of-age in movies. (We need only think of the iconic scenes in Westerns like *Shane* and *The Shootist* where the gunfighter passes on his expertise to a boy who idolizes him.) The scene is uncomfortable because of its dramatic irony: at this point, the audience, unlike Frankie, already knows that Phil is the killer, a narrative trick common to thrillers and horror films. (An easily recognizable version of this dramatic irony is the slasher film's tendency to let the audience know the killer's whereabouts without the victim knowing, as in the kitchen scene from *Halloween*, where we see Michael over Annie's shoulder while she talks on the phone.) We are left with

the unsettling intermeshing of two different film conventions: the warm torch-passing moment of a father figure teaching a boy to shoot undercut by the tense moment before the killer strikes in a horror film.

The relationship between Frankie and Phil is also made more explicit by Phil's relationship to Frankie's family, especially Frankie's father. Although we find out that Phil is in fact not related to the Scarlatti's, we also find out that he was raised as Angelo's brother, and in fact the two boys call him Uncle Phil.²⁴ Furthermore, Phil is closely associated with Angelo in a number of ways. They are precisely the same age, having graduated from high school in the same year, and they work together at the same job. Significantly, Phil's high school class ring, the object that associates him with the murders and the contested object around which the film's plot turns, is identical to Angelo's but for the engraving, which Geno must polish even in order to read.

The Oedipal reassurance of both *Lady in White* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* works on the same premise. Both films leave the good father intact (in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, in fact, the good father is not only intact but redeemed), while destroying the bad father, the pretender to the role of father, whose intentions are dangerous to the child. Thus, the Oedipal trajectory is theoretically complete: the "father" has been vanquished and the child is free of this tyranny without guilt since the "good father" still exists. *Lady in*

²⁴ There are a few possibilities for this rather obvious displacement of Phil from the Scarlatti family. The most conservative is a genetic theory of horror not unlike the one that both Chuck Jackson and William Paul read in *The Bad Seed*. If we assume that homicidal tendencies are born rather than made, Phil's behavior would cast suspicion on the entire family. It is also possible that LaLoggia found making Phil an actual relative would be too traumatic for children, although his position as "uncle" in the film, and the fact that Frankie trusts him just as he would an uncle would seem to contradict such an assumption. A third possibility is that Phil's loss of his parents is in some way significant. Such a theory would, of course, link Phil more closely to the theme of loss that LaLoggia points to in the film, as well as draw some loose correlation between Phil and the homicidally bereaved mother who shoots the school janitor. As I have mentioned before, there is a dark undercurrent to the film that would seem to point to a societal view of horror. Ultimately, the film needs its supernatural element to complete its project of reassurance. Only the lady in white can save Frankie because society, even when it works as it does in the school janitor's case, is incapable of preventing the horror.

White goes even further by providing a sort of unification with the mother in the character of Melissa, who is a shadow of Frankie. (Frankie endures what she endures—not only the loss of his mother, but also the same murder in the cloakroom—only with the single different result that he lives.) Since we know (as does the child viewer in many ways) that the true unification of the male child with the mother is tragic, *Lady in White* cannot offer a truly Oedipal ending, but it does offer a positive ending that at least attempts to respond to its Oedipal pressures. By vanquishing the bad father, Frankie enables Melissa, his own double, to unite with her mother, and one version of the Oedipal fantasy is completed (one entirely devoid of any unpleasant sexual side effects). Since this unification does not require the absence of Frankie's own father, it can be entirely reassuring.

A less "reassuring" reading of the film would certainly point up the fact that the entire film operates on overlays between light and dark. LaLoggia's warm lighting at the beginning of the film, the endearing presence of Frankie's grandparents, and the film's idyllic small-town nostalgia all contrast with a terribly dark plot. In its very attempt at reassurance, the film shrugs off the graphic murder of the school janitor, a scene made more disturbing by its context. The system actually works, the grand jury refuses to indict, but there is a heritage of murder and revenge in this idyllic setting that can't be escaped. If a significant portion of the film is about loss and recovery, another significant portion of it, a portion that seems aimed largely at adults, is about loss and *the inability* to recover. While the film focuses on Frankie and Melissa and their mutual "recovery," virtually every minor character in the film is unable to recover from loss: Amanda, Phil, the homicidal mother, and even the janitor's wife are depicted as bound up in a cycle of hopelessness and violence. The film strikingly manages to pass off these characters as insignificant in a resolution that is clearly meant to be hopeful.

Like *Lady in White*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* creates a split between good father and bad father that enables the shunting of all “bad” paternal traits onto Mr. Dark, the “bad father” who must be vanquished in order to allow the redemption of the good father. But *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, by exiling its female characters from most of the film’s significant action, has more difficulty dealing with this displacement of Oedipal rage onto a bad father character. It can do so only by “regressing” Charles, by making him figuratively younger, more like the boys themselves, freed from adult responsibility and guilt. Having exorcised the father, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* has no role for Charles except as one of the (prepubescent) boys. For this same reason, the Oedipal trajectory of *Lady in White* results, not in the motion of Frankie away from the family and out into the world, but in a *rejoining* with the family unit. Angelo is still “the father.” In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the motion is out into the world for all three. Charles, having been forgiven and thus freed from his paternal guilt, is no longer “the father.” Thus, while the Oedipal trajectory does “succeed” by resulting in a certain motion away from the family, it also requires for its “happiness” that the boys take Charles with them, that he regress to a childhood state.

To some extent, similar Oedipal conflicts and reassurances are at work in almost all the films I’ve studied. *Gremlins*, in its preoccupation with the role of the child, also shows a complementary preoccupation with the role of the father and with the attempted restoration of that figure specifically at the hands of the child. The film ends with the restoration of Rand as the head of the household, a situation emphasized by the level of subordination given him by his family.²⁵ Perhaps more importantly, the film also ends with the reintroduction of the only strong, positive patriarchal figure, the Chinese Grandfather (who, being

²⁵ Rand’s re-establishment here, of course, tends to come off as rather comic, not only because it is undermined in the following scene by his gift to the Chinese Grandfather (the smokeless ashtray that we already know doesn’t work), but also because we have seen Lynn fight off the

the good father, has traveled from Chinatown to take Gizmo home) and with a promise of future patriarchy.

The Chinese Grandfather's final speech is a privileged portion of the film because it clearly fulfills the role of the "moral of the story": "You do with Mogwai what your society has done with all of nature's gifts. You do not understand. You are not ready." The scene continues with a brief interaction between Billy, Gizmo and the Chinese Grandfather, in which Gizmo speaks to Billy, for the first time, in English. It is a privileged scene for viewers, the equivalent of E.T.'s farewell to Elliott in *E.T.*, and an important scene for the very twist that it puts on the earlier lines:



Grandfather: He [Gizmo] has something to say, uh, to you
[Billy].

Billy: You mean you understand what he says when he
speaks to you?

Grandfather: To hear one has only to listen. [*Grandfather
opens the mogwai box*]

Gizmo: Bye, Billy

Grandfather: Perhaps someday you may be ready. Until
then Mogwai will be waiting.

Gizmo doesn't get to choose who he goes with. The film clearly indicates that the Chinese Grandfather is Gizmo's "proper" father, and it presents Gizmo's stay with the Pelzers as a sort of innocent kidnapping. But the film does give Gizmo the power not only to save Billy's life, but also to grant him a certain nobility, to recognize his potential as a "good father." Furthermore, as the Chinese Grandfather is presented, not only as the film's only "good" father, but also its only "true" father, his words, driven by Gizmo's obvious privileging of Billy, carry a great deal of patriarchal weight. If there were some doubt earlier in the

gremlins on her own. At best, Rand comes off as a sort of sweet figurehead, to whom his patient subjects willingly submit. At worst, he seems simply foolish.

film about Billy's gender identity as a parent, that doubt is eliminated here by the clearly domestic and romantic presence of Kate. Gizmo's privilege here to grant Billy special status is not unlike Frankie Scarlatti's role of identifying and eliminating the pretender-father, thus reestablishing the power of the "true" father.

A similar quest for the "true" father is at work in *The Lost Boys*, where the central tension of the film revolves around finding the "head vampire." Sam must find the head vampire and destroy him in order to save Michael. Throughout the film, Sam's panic over the vampires is repeatedly interpreted by his mother as concern over her relationship with Max. The vampire "test" that Sam and the Frog brothers put Max through ends with Max's reassurance to Sam:

Max: I know what you're thinking, Sam, but you're wrong.

Sam: I am?

Max: Yeah. I'm not trying to replace your father. Or steal your mother away from you. I would just like to be your friend, that's all.

Later, when Sam goes to his mother for help in destroying the vampires, she once again assumes that Sam's concern is over her romantic relationship with Max.

Lucy: Honey, there's nothing wrong with Max. I don't know why you don't want me to see him.

Sam: I'm not talking about Max, all right? The hell with Max!

The irony here is that Sam *is* talking about Max; he just doesn't know it. The revelation of Max's intentions at the movie's climax indicates that Sam *should* have feared precisely what his mother and Max have been trying to reassure him about. David and his vampire gang, who seem to be seeking to pull Michael *out* of his family are less a threat than Max, who wants to unite it:

 *Max:* It was you I was after all along, Lucy.

Lucy: What?

Max: I knew that if I could get Sam and Michael into the family, there was no way you could say no.

Lucy: Where's Michael?

Max: It was all going to be so perfect, Lucy. Just like one, big, happy family. Your boys...and my boys.

The movie certainly suggests that Sam would do well to worry about this intrusion of the pretender into the family. Max hasn't actually lied to Sam. He *doesn't* want to steal Lucy away. He wants them to be united, and the threat is less that Max will become their father than that they will become his sons. It is the cohesion of the family that's dangerous, not its dissolution. This potential subversion, however, is itself actually undermined by the fact that the ultimate savior of the film must come from within the family. It is Grandpa who is the "true" father and who can reunite the family, eliminate the threat and provide the necessary reassurance.

No doubt both Robin Wood and Tony Williams would say that these films are reassuring on the topic of fatherhood because, as Wood puts it, "Restoration of the father...constitutes...the dominant project ...of contemporary Hollywood cinema" (172). I don't deny that this is true, but it does seem necessary to reiterate that I am concerned with films made specifically for children. Granted, the theory that even children need to be "reassured," especially on the topic of patriarchy, is culturally conditioned and fully debatable, but Wood's argument concerns "children's films conceived and marketed largely *for adults*" (163, emphasis added), implying that children's films, as a genre, *do* "reassure," and that this quality, combined with an adult-oriented marketing campaign, is part of what marks these "children's films for adults." While I am certainly not above acknowledging the social and political pressures inherent in these films, it would seem that Wood's argument disqualifies itself by thus specifying a target audience that is pointedly *not* children.

Recreating the Father

In its very first moments, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* reveals its Oedipal intentions. At the end of his introductory voiceover, the film's narrator, meant to be protagonist Will Halloway all grown up, says "But perhaps this is most of the all the story of my father." And in an odd, paradoxical way, it is. But, like *Back to the Future*, it is far more the story of Will's re-creation of his father. In an inversion appropriate to a film intended to please, above all, a child audience, Will Halloway will become the hero here. He will, in fact, at least for his father, take over the role implicitly promised to Mr. Dark in the film's tagline: "What would you give a man who could make your deepest dream come true?"

It is appropriate that the film begins with a voiceover since the voiceover makes it very clear that what we are dealing with here is all flashback and all very much from Will Halloway's viewpoint. It is Will telling the story, Will *creating* the past for us. And the remainder of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* will be about creating and recreating the past. The film takes place in a world in which the "deepest dreams" of the film's tagline are, in fact, memories. For Miss Foley and Ed, those deepest dreams involve simply erasing the past; for Charles Halloway, the dream is to change the past. Though the film pretends for some time that Jim Nightshade's dream is simply to be grown up, it is fairly clear that Jim wants more than just to be grown up: he simultaneously wants his father, and wants to *be* his father, particularly the father of his fantasies, the big game hunter, the Egyptologist, the adventurer.

Jim's fantasizing about his father and his assertion that his father will return offers us our first glimpse into his personality and sets the tone for the entire film, a film that is, in its essence, about the power to rewrite history, especially the history of fathers and sons. The "deepest dreams" of six of the film's nine significant characters aren't really about *gaining* anything. They are instead about *regaining* things. Miss Foley wants to regain her lost beauty, Ed his lost

arm and leg, Mrs. Nightshade her lost husband. Mr. Dark's most important mystical power, it would seem, is the power to rewrite the past, and it is this power that Will usurps from him before the final battle in which Mr. Dark is defeated.

This power is most clearly articulated in Mr. Dark's longest and most magnificent scene, the battle between himself and Charles Halloway in the library. The scene revolves specifically around Mr. Dark's ability to "erase" history. Linking each page of a journal, which Charles and the boys have been using to trace the history of the carnival, to a year in Charles Halloway's life, Mr. Dark begins to pull the pages. As he does so, each page ignites in a burst of light. It is Mr. Dark's most powerful scene, and it is a battle he will, for the time being, win, at least in part because the two boys, the reserve of youth on which Mr. Halloway must depend for his own power, are hidden in the library stacks, those depositories of the very history that Mr. Dark would erase. "Your books," Mr. Dark says, "cannot harm me, old man." The power of Dark's magical carousel is also the power to erase time. Although the boys speculate that the carousel can make people older as well as younger, and this proves true in the film's climax, we only see the carousel used *successfully* to go backward—when Mr. Dark reduces Mr. Cooger to a child. To go forward in time, it would seem, is only to meet death; it is so for Mr. Dark on the carousel and for Charles Halloway at the hands of the dust witch.²⁶ This fear of the future makes for an appropriate theme for a film whose very milieu is a tremendously idealized past, a past where children scamper through pumpkin fields and frolic with downtown shopkeepers after school. If the film demands little of adults, it at least demands that they temporarily erase their own knowledge of history in order to willingly

²⁶ It is the dust witch who is most associated with dreams of *gaining* things, dreams associated not with the past but with the future. It is in choosing the voluptuous Pam Grier for the character of the dust witch that Clayton's film most clearly deviates from Bradbury's novel, but it is perhaps telling that in the novel the dust witch is the carnival's fortune teller. In the film, she is the primary figure in two of the three remaining fantasies, all three of which involve strong sexual connotations.

believe this one. The past, it would seem, is worth selling your soul for. The future, outside of dreams of sex and money, is not.

Of course, the power of changing the past is the effect it can have on the “present,” which brings us to William Paul’s reading of one of the most important of all 80’s movies about changing the past—*Back to the Future*. *Back to the Future* ostensibly focuses on a single mission: having been sent into the past, Marty McFly inadvertently comes between his parents before their first kiss. McFly’s mission from that point forward is to ensure that his parents eventually get together. What makes the film interesting, however, is that McFly does in fact change the past—and therefore the “present”—for the better. And he does so by re-creating his father. At the beginning of the film, George McFly is a definitive loser with a low-paying job, an oppressive family life and a bullying boss. After Marty’s “makeover” of his father in 1955 (which basically amounts only to making his father mad enough to hit a bully) he returns to the present to find his family reinvented as a result of his adventure.

In both *Back to the Future* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, it falls to the sons to remedy a crippling problem buried in the past and thereby reinvent their fathers. For George McFly, that crippling problem is that he never stood up to bully Biff Tannen, and the defining moment is when George finally punches him. For Charles Halloway, everything rests on his inability to save four-year-old Will from drowning and his having to rely on Jim’s father to do the job. In both cases, the conflict is one of traditional male values. For George McFly, it is the inability to defend his manhood in a traditional male fistfight. For Charles Halloway, it is the inability to live up to the expectations of fatherhood by physically protecting his offspring from danger. In one of the two conversations that form the pivotal point in the film, Charles says to Will, “Mr. Nightshade did your father’s work for him. I can’t forgive myself for that. Or him either, I guess.” In both films, the Oedipal conflict is reduced not to killing or rejecting the father

but to redeeming him. In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, as in *Back to the Future*, “[a]ccepting the father finally depends on recasting him in the image of the son” (Paul 214). In both films, the ultimate result of this recasting is to imbue the fathers specifically with *youth*. It falls to the horror film to take this redemption to its most extreme point: for Will Halloway, redeeming his father means quite literally saving him.

There is an interesting suggestion at work in the resolution of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, however, one which extends beyond Paul’s reading of *Back to the Future*, in which the father is recast in the image of the son. To juxtapose Will and Charles Halloway through the mirror is to conjure the spirit of the Ego Ideal, a spirit that *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, in its focus throughout on the “perfect” image in the mirror, conjures repeatedly. We have seen throughout the film how the mirror maze “works.” Characters look into the mirrors and see a perfect version of themselves. Such is Lacan’s mirror, the mirror of the Ego Ideal. It is significant then that the mirror maze doesn’t work precisely the same way for Charles.²⁷ Charles sees an entire scene played out, one which ends with him face to face with Will. It is Will who is his counter-image in the mirror, not himself. Significantly, then, his redemption comes precisely from his more closely resembling Will, from his regression to a more carefree state. Only after having achieved this regression is Charles capable of helping to save Jim.

As Paul points out, *Back to the Future* is, at its core, a coming-of-age story. It fantasizes that the Oedipal conflict can be resolved and maturity reached by the perfect son not by vanquishing the father, but by vanquishing the Oedipal conflict itself. Paul notes especially that “The son himself harbors quite the opposite of incestuous and patricidal feelings” (215). *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is also a coming-of-age story, but rather than attempt to vanquish the Oedipal conflict, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, like *Lady in White*,

²⁷ Certainly there are narrative explanations for this phenomenon, but I would argue that this shift in the mirrors’ purpose is nonetheless significant, if only because it’s different.

engages in a practice not entirely unlike the sort of “inoculation” that Robin Wood points to in *Poltergeist* (180). It shunts all bad paternal characteristics onto the evil pretender father in order to redeem the good father. At this point, however, the film no longer knows quite what to do with Charles Halloway, so it “regresses” him, by pulling him out of the symbolic world entirely, out of the library that has been his milieu throughout the film, out of the shattered mirror

Clip 4. Below, a playable film clip of Charles running through the fields with the boys. Click on the still to play the clip.



maze, and into the world of “nature,” the fields that have for the duration of the film been the province of the children. As in so many of these films, then, the message is the precise reverse of the Oedipal trajectory in many ways: the son should not attempt to become (replace) his father; the father should attempt to become the son.

CHAPTER 4

FEMALE IDENTITY AND THE CINEMATIC GAZE

The Watcher in the Woods begins like a stalker film, the opening credits playing over what is clearly an unattributed point-of-view shot²⁸, and in some ways it pays off on this promise. After all, it *is*, in many ways, a stalker film of sorts, but it differs from a traditional

stalker film in just enough ways to make the differences as important as the similarities. It seems notable that, of the films I've studied

here, the only one that concerns itself

primarily with girls' coming of age also concerns itself explicitly with the concept of the gaze, of who looks, who looks back, and who seems to be looking, because the central issue of the film, significantly wrapped up in what it means to *be* a woman, really is who *is* "the watcher"? A film that repeatedly revolves around questions of the gaze, *The Watcher in the Woods* is also a film that responds to questions of gender identity—particularly as gender identity relates to the female experience of coming of age.

In response to the argument that the point of view shot leads to male identification with the monster in the traditional slasher film, Carol Clover has pointed out that when the camera's gaze finally is embodied, we find the killer "commonly masked, fat, deformed, or dressed as a woman" (296). What to make then of the simply disembodied gaze of *The Watcher in the Woods*? The gaze here is never actually attributed, although the film offers several important



Clip 5. Above, a playable film clip showing the point of view shot that indicates the "watcher." Click on the still to play the clip.

²⁸ The point-of-view shot in the slasher film is characterized by an slightly unsteady hand-held camera shot which usually suggests a sense of human height and human visual restrictions, like the interposing of objects between the camera and the object being viewed.

“red herrings” along the way, and this lack of attribution manages a degree of gender ambiguity that could hardly be unintentional. Furthermore, it is possible to assign the titular nomination, “watcher,” to several characters in the narrative, for it is not only the disembodied gaze that “watches” in the woods, but other characters as well: Mrs. Aylwood, Tom Colley, or even Jan.

For the first section of the film, the viewer is led to believe that the watcher of the title is Mrs. Aylwood herself. Certainly, Mrs. Aylwood watches the Curtises carefully in the beginning, especially Jan. With its invoking of Hansel and Gretel in the first scene in the woods, in which Ellie says she plans to go exploring, the film quite deliberately opens up the possibility that Mrs. Aylwood is a witch:

Jan: Well, don't forget to leave a trail of pebbles so I can
track you down and grab you before the wicked witch
eats you up.

Ellie: If she lives in a gingerbread house, I'll eat *it* up. I'm
starved!²⁹

There are also few actresses who would carry such intertextual weight. *The Watcher in the Woods* came out the same year as Kim Carnes' "Bette Davis Eyes," a coincidence no doubt, but a suggestive one nonetheless. It is at least partly the intensity of Bette Davis' gaze that makes Mrs. Aylwood so suspect. The film maintains Mrs. Aylwood as the film's "watcher" until after Jan's near-drowning, the point at which Mrs. Aylwood is at her most threatening. Ellie later says that she thought Mrs. Aylwood was trying to drown Jan, and certainly the audience is led to believe this until Ellie tells Jan that Mrs. Aylwood actually saved her life. In either case, the film does not entirely remove the title of

²⁹ Although Ellie's constant hunger throughout the film is presented almost as a comic personality trait, the story of Hansel and Gretel haunts *The Watcher in the Woods* throughout. Bettelheim writes that "Hansel and Gretel" is, in its essence, a story that responds to children's oral greediness: "The child recognizes that, like Hansel and Gretel, he would wish to eat up the gingerbread house, no matter what the dangers" (161). Through her constant talk of hunger, the film clearly sets up Ellie in the Hansel/Gretel role, and one trajectory that *The Watcher in the Woods* follows is that of transferring the role of the witch from Mrs. Aylwood to the disembodied "watcher." It is the watcher who "consumes" Ellie.

“watcher” from Mrs. Aylwood; it simply changes the connotation of the word. If until this point “watcher” has been inherently threatening, it now simply takes on the meaning it holds in the phrase “watching after” someone, for clearly Mrs. Aylwood had followed the girls into the Woods in order to know they needed her. If Mrs. Aylwood’s “watching” has now become benign, it is only slightly less threatening. She is, after all, still “watching.”

This role of “watcher” is one that *Lady in White* also assigns to an eccentric older woman. In one of the more chilling moments in that film, the camera pulls back to show Amanda outside Frankie’s bedroom window, watching him sleep. Linda Williams, in her feminist work on the horror genre, has suggested an affinity

Figure 3. Below, Amanda watches Frankie sleep.

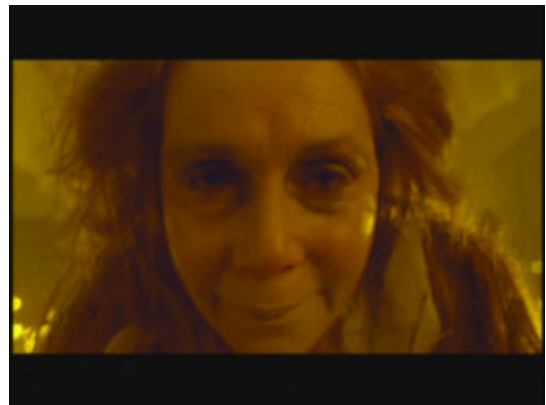


between the woman and the monster in horror films that includes the tendency to cast the older woman as an object of horror (21). While both *The Watcher in the Woods* and *Lady in White* eventually back down from casting Mrs. Aylwood and Amanda as the films’ final monsters, the use of them as objects of horror, even provisionally, is significant. Both

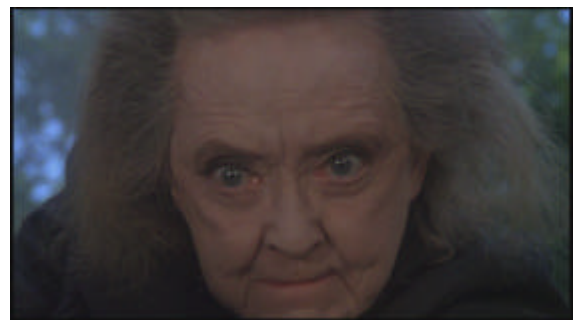
characters manage to maintain their places as threatening even when they have proven themselves benign figures by saving the protagonist’s life. Frankie is clearly terrified by Amanda leaning over him in the bed after she’s saved him (temporarily) from Phil. Later in *The Watcher in the Woods*, Mrs. Aylwood stops Ellie and tempts her into the house with the promise of tea and cakes, and the viewer can’t help but think of the witch’s gingerbread house that Ellie mentioned earlier. Both characters, at certain points, suggest Barbara Creed’s abject mother, the suffocating mother from whom the child cannot escape. In the narratives, Mrs. Aylwood is literally the mother who will not “let go of” her

child, but Amanda also suggests this nature in her refusal to let go of Melissa. The film implies that one of the things Melissa and her mother must be released from is the shrine that Amanda has built to them in the cottage. This suffocating mother effect is most obvious in Frankie's scene with Amanda, in which we see Amanda's face filling the entire field of vision as he lies tucked into the bed, but it is also suggested in the drowning scene in *The Watcher in the Woods*, the scene in which Mrs. Aylwood is pushing Jan into the water, literally suffocating her. *The Watcher in the Woods* (possibly because it is a film largely about redeeming the mother) attempts to nullify this suggestion by revealing that Mrs. Aylwood was actually trying to set Jan free of the branches that were holding her down, but the effect has already been achieved.

The clearest example in any of these films of the older woman as object of horror is Mrs. Deagle in *Gremlins*. I have mentioned earlier the film's favoring of traditional femininity, a preference most obvious in the kitchen scene where Lynn kills most of the first "litter" of gremlins. The same preference is at work in the fact that the film can only give Kate power in a traditional female position, not at the job she shares with Billy in the male-dominated world of the bank, but as a barmaid, capitalizing on the gremlins' own drunken vanity in order to escape. Mrs. Deagle, then, by rejecting traditional femininity entirely, becomes the perfect victim for this film because her authority comes specifically from usurping the power of her dead husband. It's significant that Dante chose to cut a scene in



Figures 4 and 5. Above, Amanda as the suffocating mother as she leans over Frankie in bed. Below, Mrs. Aylwood as she pushes Jan further under the water at the pond.



which Mrs. Deagle talks to a photograph of her dead husband because “it made the character too sympathetic for us to shoot her out of the window” (Martin 43). In order to properly demonize Mrs. Deagle, the film must write the husband out entirely, since it is inherent to Mrs. Deagle’s character that she has embodied the male power of her dead husband, thus usurping his masculinity and authority, qualities the film routinely punishes. Mrs. Deagle is also the epitome of Vivian Sobchack’s “excessive” older woman--over-dressed, overly



Figure 6. Above, Mrs. Deagle as the “excessive” older woman

made up and, as Freud puts it “quarrelsome, peevish, and argumentative, petty and miserly” (qtd. in Sobchack 339). As such, it is significant that the film grants her no sympathy and disposes of her specifically with an excess of power. Such portrayals of women, even older women, are significant in children’s horror because of the

impact they have on gender identity. A children’s film like *The Watcher in the Woods* particularly points this up by dealing so directly with female gender identity.

Linda Williams’ work foregrounds the horror film’s tendency to either vilify or victimize the woman who embodies the gaze. In short, the woman who “looks” deserves whatever she gets. As a film about female gender identity, *The Watcher in the Woods* is particularly interested in the costs of the woman looking or not, and this preoccupation plays itself out in a complicated web of figures and images that include mirrors, the blindfolded Karen Aylwood, and the disembodied watcher, who cannot be looked back upon at all. If *Gremlins* celebrates the power of traditional femininity, *The Watcher in the Woods* warns against it. Jan must be ever-vigilant, and she must usurp the male’s power in

order to succeed, by turning John Keller's original power over Karen back on him and taking over the administration of the game that originally resulted in Karen's abduction. It is Karen's submission to the traditional female role that ends in her capture, her willing submission to John Keller's rules: "You must not show fear, you must not speak, you must not remove the blindfold, you must not move at all." When Jan takes Karen's place, she does so without the blindfold that made Karen the passive object of the gaze. Karen was punished for *not* looking, for submitting to the role of traditional femininity.

Perhaps the clearest and most complex example of a woman punished for looking is Miss Foley in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, whose brief story merits close examination. Miss Foley is the only character in the film whose fate the viewer actually sees played out as it happens, and thematically, it is a fate involving the woman's relationship to the gaze. Miss Foley is the only female character in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* through whose gaze the

Clip 6. Below, a playable film clip showing Miss Foley's fate as the woman who appropriates the gaze. Click on the still to play the clip.



audience is permitted to look, and both times we are permitted this female point of view are as she gazes upon versions of herself: at the beginning of the film when she finds Jim Nightshade's drawing of her and in this scene where she sees her younger self in the mirror. Significantly, the gaze that Miss Foley returns is her own, and she is punished for her desire to be beautiful again, once again the object of the gaze.

The fate of blindness, then, is more than just poetic justice for her vanity; it is the result of her fantasy literalized. To willingly become the object of the gaze is to forfeit the right to return it.³⁰

³⁰ Miss Foley, too, like Mrs. Deagle, is an "excess" woman, seeking to regain her lost youth in the same manner that Sobchack's Wasp Woman and Leech Woman do in their respective films.

The Watcher in the Woods also concerns itself with mirrors, since it is always in mirrors that Jan sees Karen Aylwood. In part, this recurring event signals an interest in identity issues. Karen Aylwood is clearly Jan's doppelganger, and her appearances begin with Jan's inability to see *herself* in the mirror. In one sense, Karen Aylwood *is* Jan's reflection, and John Keller is not so far off base when he "misunderstands" Jan's assertion that she has been seeing Karen in mirrors: "You see...you see yourself as Karen?" Jan *does* see "herself" as Karen because she sees Karen where she should be. And everyone else sees Karen in Jan. Mrs. Aylwood rents them the house on the basis of Jan's resemblance to Karen, and Tom Colley thinks she *is* Karen. Jan must bring Karen back, by becoming Karen, in order to regain her identity. As she tells Mrs. Aylwood, if she doesn't, she will always "be haunted." In this sense, *The Watcher in the Woods* is very much a film about establishing identity, something that the child viewer is intimately concerned with. *The Lost Boys*, also a film concerned with establishing identity, uses the mirror in much the same way. While the fact that vampires cast no reflection is purely conventional, this tradition takes on additional meaning in a film in which identity is largely established on the basis of affiliation. Michael's reflection grows dim at the point at which his identity is in question. If the mirror answers part of the question "who am I?" then in both *The Lost Boys* and *The Watcher in the Woods*, the horror is that the mirror doesn't fully respond. In *The Watcher in the Woods*, Karen must be granted the ability to return the gaze, must have her blindfold removed, in order to be granted an identity separate from Jan, an identity *outside* the mirror.

But *Watcher in the Woods* most directly takes up the topic of the gaze in the "character" of the watcher. While the film suggests embodiments of the unattributed gaze, including Mrs. Aylwood and Tom Colley, the mysterious "watcher" ultimately turns out to have no body at all; it must appropriate Ellie's body in order to communicate. Tania Modleski has pointed out that the transcendence of the body suggested by the voice-over in films is almost always

gendered male, and indeed in the three films I've studied that include voice-overs, the voice-over is always by a male character, but the voice of the watcher, as it emanates from Ellie's body, is surprisingly gender-neutral—too high to definitely be a man's voice, too husky to be firmly gendered female. 🔊) Certainly, the film provides ample evidence for the gendering of the watcher as female. Karen, with whom the watcher accidentally traded places, is female, as is Jan, the film's protagonist, and Ellie, through whom the watcher chooses to communicate. But perhaps most importantly, Hansel and Gretel's witch is female, and it is finally the watcher who takes up this role mentioned at the beginning of the film. It is the watcher who finally "consumes" Ellie, only to reassuringly release her unharmed.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Looking closely at this group of films illuminates topics of interest in 1980s film-making. Their hybrid nature and growing interest in targeted marketing and merchandising reveal the concerns of an industry that sees itself in crisis and sees the criteria for success in the industry beginning to change. They are films that attempt to be in touch with children's concerns and, as such, address important coming-of-age topics that reveal many of the things we use to define ourselves within our culture: gender identity, independence, and authority. But it is perhaps the patriarchal crisis that most clearly defines the films of this decade and that emerges as most noticeable throughout these particular films.

Numerous critics, in their writing on 1980s cinema in general, have pointed out the decade's preoccupation with fatherhood³¹. On the other side of this fascination with the father, however, is a corresponding fascination with what it means to be a child, and while the central role of the father in mainstream 1980s cinema is one largely agreed upon by critics, the role of the child is much more contestable. Fathers, across the work of several critics, represent patriarchy itself, so the act of redeeming the father is an act of redeeming patriarchy. For Tania Modleski, this is the act of feminizing the father, thus writing out any role whatsoever for the mother. For William Paul, it is the act of rewriting history in our own image. For Robin Wood, it is the reestablishment of a coherent master narrative.

By this standard, however, the child must represent all that is "other," and this category is as fragmented as "patriarchy" is whole. In a culture that is

³¹ Sarah Harwood seems to me to have done the most extensive study of this phenomenon, but several other critics, including Robin Wood, Tony Williams, and Vivan Sobchack, have also tracked this trend in 80's films.

constantly “consuming,” all that is “other” is always being contained in the master narrative itself. The alternatives are always being absorbed by the mainstream. In a consumer culture, especially one as frantic as that of the 1980s, one can see the possibility of a broader cultural implication inherent in the child’s fear of being eaten. By Freudian standards, it is the dark half of the oral fixation. To simplify for the sake of argument, children want to eat everything, so they assume that someone must want to eat them. But in a culture that consumes everything, the recurring image of being consumed (as Dark’s Carnival consumes in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, or as the sea in *Lady in White*, the vampires of *The Lost Boys*, the alternate dimension in *The Watcher in the Woods*, or the gremlins in *Gremlins* consume) can have an entirely separate set of broader cultural meanings, in which the figure of the child is in constant threat of being consumed.

Culturally, if children *do* represent all that is “other” in contrast to the father’s place as all that is not, then these films indicate an altogether frantic fear of becoming. To “grow up,” to take one’s place in the world, is to take the place of the father, but these films indicate the place of the father is nowhere to be. These children’s horror movies make up an odd group of films, then, one in which Oedipal trajectories routinely run backward, toward home. While the movement may well be toward adulthood in some sense, it is also always toward the originating family. *The Watcher in the Woods* and *Lady in White* base their entire narratives upon the successful reunions of mothers and daughters, both into families in which there is no father. *Lady in White* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* both end with the reunion of fathers and sons in narratives in which the mother has been exiled, either by the action of the plot or by a narrative that simply writes her off as inconsequential. Both *The Lost Boys* and *Gremlins* manage a teenage coming of age story that includes a romantic subplot. For Michael in *The Lost Boys*, this subplot goes as far as a proto-family with the inclusion of the child vampire, Laddie. But in neither movie

is there any indication of a movement away from the family. Billy and Kate in *Gremlins* are presented as a couple, but they are presented in such a way as to link them inextricably with Rand and Lynn, on the front porch of the Pelzer family home. *The Lost Boys* seems to entirely forget about Starr at the end of the film; it moves her into the background with Laddie and finally out of the shot completely. Our final view is of Michael, Lucy and Sam in the kitchen with Grandpa. Michael may have come of age, but he has returned to the originating family. *Something Wicked This Way Comes* succeeds not only in rejecting the father's legacy, but also in reversing the Oedipal trajectory of the one significant and positive adult character. The child must never become the father, but the father can become the child. This interest in the child, then, reveals itself not only as a response to industry pressures but as a response to a cultural concern that dominates popular culture in this decade.

It seems important to me, however, that we as a discipline not forget the nature of the material we study. Films are not only a cultural art form but also an industry creation, first and foremost products—and products that are expensive to produce and require a great deal of cooperation and man-power. The study of films is always the study of the film industry, whether we recognize it or not, and to approach the study of film without a realization of this fact is to approach it with blinders.

I chose to study a particular generic cycle of films precisely because viewing film studies in this way helps to illuminate the industry and cultural pressures that affect the production of any film. In the moment of film history when the horror film begins to wane in popularity, the family film begins its rise. In the middle of this shift, a shift that reflects technological and cultural changes that will forever affect the industry—and therefore the products the industry creates—a seemingly impossible hybrid is born in the form of the children's horror film. And it is a hybrid that casts light both on the past it draws from and the future it anticipates.

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- Child's Play*, dir. Tom Holland, 1988, United Artists
- Children of the Corn*, dir. Fritz Kiersch, 1984, dist. by New World Pictures
- Cinderella*, dir. Clyde Geronimi et al, 1950, Walt Disney Pictures
- E.T., The Extraterrestrial* dir. Stephen Spielberg, 1982, Universal
- The Exorcist* , dir. William Friedkin, 1973, Warner Brothers
- Firestarter*, dir. Mark L Lester, 1984, Universal
- Friday the 13th*, dir. Sean S. Cunningham, 1980, Paramount
- Gremlins*, dir. Joe Dante, 1984, Amblin Entertainment

Halloween 4, dir. Dwight H. Little, 1988, Trancas International Films Inc.

Halloween, dir. John Carpenter, 1978, Falcon Films

Heaven Help Us, dir. Michael Dinner, 1985, Home Box Office

Lady in White, dir. Frank LaLoggia, 1988, New Sky Communications

The Lost Boys, dir. Joel Schumacher, 1987, Warner Brothers

A Nightmare on Elm Street, dir. Wes Craven, 1984, New Line Cinema

The Omen, dir. Richard Donner, 1976, 20th Century Fox

The Outsiders, dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1983, Zoetrope Studios

Pet Sematary, dir. Mary Lambert, 1989, Paramount

Poltergeist, dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982, MGM

The Shining, dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980, Warner Brothers

The Silence of the Lambs, dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991, Orion Pictures Corporation

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, dir. David Hand, 1937, Walt Disney Pictures

Solarbabies, dir. Alan Johnson, 1986, MGM

Something Wicked This Way Comes, dir. Jack Clayton, 1983, Walt Disney Pictures

Stand by Me, dir. Rob Reiner, 1986, Columbia Pictures Corporation

Star Wars, dir. George Lucas, 1977, Lucasfilm Ltd.

Texas Chainsaw Massacre, dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974, Vortex

The Watcher in the Woods, dir. John Hough, 1980, Walt Disney Pictures

Vita

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